



Miami-Dade

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MIAMI-DADE GOVERNMENT

Getting the 311 for county help

A new 311 telephone service available to anyone in Miami-Dade County should help residents cut through frustrating bureaucratic red tape, county leaders say.

BY CHARLES RABIN
crabin@herald.com

The woman calling from South Miami-Dade wants to report that her lengthy grass has been cut, a neighborhood blight for which she received a warning from a county inspector.

In the blink of an eye, her problem was resolved: 311 operator Sylvia Rodriguez typed in an address on a computer screen, read the citation, then transferred the woman to the inspector who had given her the warning.

Case closed.

And for Miami-Dade County and city of Miami officials, a dream come true.

Though it actually set sail in November, the county officially introduced its 311 phone service to residents Friday. It will use 82 operators to track almost any inquiry from the public in an effort to find resolutions. Just dial 311 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. any day except holidays to reach the center, which responds in English, Spanish and Creole.

Almost as importantly, it makes 1,600 county telephone numbers obsolete. And it will be used as a tool to predict future public service problems and to evaluate the performance of county and city employees.

"It'll make people more accountable," Miami Mayor Manny Diaz said. "Now if someone says you haven't picked up my trash, we can check the computer."

Simply put, the 311 program is a tool the public is urged to use to cut through mind-numbing bureaucratic red tape.

Throw out the blue book portion of the White Pages, forget calling 411 for government phone numbers, and think about why you're dialing 911, reserved for real emergencies, city and county leaders now urge.

"It's the future front door of government," said County Manager George Burgess.

There are similar programs around the country, in Baltimore, Chicago, New York and Dallas. Alvarez said Friday this launch is the first between two municipalities. He also urged all other local municipal governments to come on board.

Nothing showed how effective the \$10 million a year system can work like Hurricane Katrina's visit three weeks ago. The usual 4,000 calls a day jumped to about 40,000.

County workers learned where problem areas were -- even as the storm crawled through the region.

"The county was able to stem flooding in some areas and prevent it in some areas," Alvarez said.

The elaborate computer networks filled with new software and flat screens are set in a large room on the second floor of the elections department on Northwest 87th Avenue in Doral.

Burgess realizes there will be problems, especially at the beginning. "We're going to grow and learn. We're not going to handle every call perfectly."

On Friday, though, no one seemed to be complaining. A man from Miami who was upset because his neighbor's tree branches were extending onto his property line had his problem quickly and almost effortlessly resolved.